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Why the Independent Media Has Little Objectivity

By Maxim Buyev

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The situation in Ukraine has prompted both Western and Russian media to pull their Cold War skeletons out of the closet. Nobody expected objective, unbiased reporting from state-controlled media outlets, but even independent and commercial publications have joined the fray.

University of Chicago economics professor Matthew Gentzkow — who won the 2014 John Bates Clark Medal, a prestigious U.S. award given to economists under 40 for their outstanding contributions to economic thought and knowledge — has studied the question of media bias for the past 10 years. According to Gentzkow, the main reason independent media are biased is because they want to indulge readers' interests. The reader always feels better if his opinions and predispositions are confirmed. Therefore, the media analyze events not so much to reveal the truth as to reinforce readers' existing stereotypes and biases.

Increased competition among media only intensifies their need to cater to readers' interests. This causes the media to focus on target audiences with the most easily defined viewpoints. As

a result, media outlets tend to cluster around extreme but opposing groups, only accentuating their differences in the process.

Readers and viewers do not suffer from this phenomenon if they are discriminating and tenacious enough to seek out the truth, a task made simpler by competition among the media. But indifferent readers, which represent the overwhelming majority of the media's target audience, become part of the herd.

This means that an independent media and freedom of expression alone do not guarantee its genuine objectivity. That can only be achieved if readers are curious and inquisitive, and that depends not only on a lack of state media censorship but on a system of education that develops critical thinking.

This reminds me of a Russian businessman who tried an experiment with a television station he had created. During the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, his channel tried to cover events objectively, presenting the views of both Russians and Georgians involved in the conflict and letting viewers draw their own conclusions.

The result? Ratings plummeted as viewers uninterested in weighing the facts switched to other channels that cast events in ways that matched their own established views.

That should give our Education Ministry some valuable food for thought.

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